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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000032

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TAGS: PREL MOPS PHUM PREF TH BM

SUBJECT: SNAPSHOT OF NORTHERN KAREN STATE PROVIDES LITTLE HOPE

REF: A. CHIANG MAI 21 (KNU ASSASSINATION)  
1B. 07 CHIANG MAI 203 (POSSIBLE KAREN STATE OFFENSIVE)  
1C. 07 CHIANG MAI 188 (FREE BURMA RANGERS)

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CLASSIFIED BY: Mike Morrow, Consul General, CG, Chiang Mai.  
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

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Summary  
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11. (C) A snapshot of Burma's northern Karen State provided by a recently returned Free Burma Rangers relief mission provides an overall bleak assessment for the local populace there. The ethnic Karen, although not facing an increase in fighting with Burma Army troops, are contending with continuing population displacement, increasing landmine casualties, hampered access to food and relief supplies, distress over the assassination of a key political leader, and absence of hope over national political developments. End Summary.

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Burma Army's Troop Surges Subsides  
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12. (C) Free Burma Rangers (FBR) founder and leader David Eubank recently returned to Chiang Mai from a four-month trip to Burma's northern Karen State. Eubank, an Amcit, was there from mid-October until late February, and reported to us on his observations. The FBR is a faith-based organization that provides humanitarian assistance to civilians in ethnic areas under attack by the Burma Army along the Thai-Burma border.

13. (C) Eubank reported that the Burma Army's deployment surge in northern Karen State, which started last October and peaked at 97 battalions in the state's three northernmost districts in mid-January, has since subsided to about 60 battalions. This is still larger than the usual 40-to-50-battalion strong presence the Burmese normally have there. Eubank pointed out that, these days, the average size of a Burmese Army "battalion" has dwindled to fewer than 150 troops.

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Noose Tightens on Ethnic Karen  
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¶4. (C) The troops in northern Karen State have been engaged primarily in road-building. Eubank explained that, as the number of roads and Burma Army encampments has increased, ethnic Karen remaining in the area have been forced to relocate. He showed us a series of FBR powerpoint maps showing how, in recent months and years:

-- the roads and encampments (20-to-40 troops each) have steadily moved eastward toward the borders of Karen State and Thailand; and

-- the number of ethnic Karen living in the area has decreased.

¶5. (C) The new roads have enabled the Burma Army to expand its control of the area, increase its mobility, and put increased pressure on the rebel Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), Eubank said. The roads - which are heavily mined and actively patrolled by Burmese troops deployed at outposts only a mile apart - also serve as barriers to Karen access to food and relief supplies. The Karen in the north have been cut off from their usual rice market in Karen State, and now can only safely travel to procure rice in Karen State, in the city of Mawchi. This area is under the control of the Karen National Solidarity Organization, which has signed a cease-fire agreement with the regime.

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No Increase in Fighting, But Landmine Injuries Up  
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¶6. (C) The increased Burmese troop deployment has not brought with it an increase in fighting, Eubank said. His FBR teams reported daily small arms and mortar fire in the road-building areas, mainly as a Burma Army tactic to chase away local villagers. The shooting did kill some civilians, however. In response, the KNLA inflicted some casualties when ambushing Burma Army troops that were rotating out of the area in January.

¶7. (C) Landmine injuries to Karen civilians are on the rise,  
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Eubank reported. Firstly, Burmese troops are protecting their new roads with landmines, and lay mines in villages they destroy to victimize residents who return to collect belongings. Secondly, many of the landmine casualties are the result of mines placed by the Karen themselves, some of which inevitably and inadvertently kill or maim locals. Eubank asserts that the majority of mines in the area are laid by the Karen, not the Burmese Army. He related a story of a village woman who strings mines across the footpaths leading to the fields where she labors, as a defense against marauding Burmese troops. While this is not a threat to innocents as long as she collects the mines at the end of her workday, Eubank pointed out, the mines could be lethal to locals should she be surprised and chased away or killed before clearing them.

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Rangers Collaborate With Thai Security Forces  
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¶8. (C) The FBR has good relations with, and shares information with, Thai security forces along the Burmese border (though Eubank would not name the specific organizations or units). When FBR teams cross into and back from Burma, the Thais not only turn a blind eye but also alert the FBR teams of areas to avoid due to Burma Army deployments. Recently, Eubank said, Thai officials gave the FBR what he considered to be a first-ever "tasking" - to report anything FBR teams picked up about Burmese uranium prospecting and/or nuclear development programs. Eubank told us he would be happy to do so, but expected the Thais to tell him what to look for and to provide supporting equipment, which has not happened.

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Karen Reaction to Mahn Sha Killing, NLD Overture, and Referendum  
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¶9. (C) We asked Eubank what reaction the Karen he met had to the February 14 assassination of Karen National Union Secretary General Mahn Sha (Ref A). He replied that the Karen were very disturbed by the killing and blamed the Burmese regime for it. Since the killing, the FBR has not detected an increase in violence between the various Karen armed groups. In fact, Eubank said, Mahn Sha's assassination appears to have had a unifying effect among the Karen.

¶10. (C) We also asked Eubank about Karen reaction to both Aung San Suu Kyi's offer for the National League for Democracy (NLD) to hold talks with Burma's ethnic groups, and the regime's announcement of a constitutional referendum. On the former, Eubank said the Karen were disappointed over the silence with which ASSK's offer was greeted by most ethnic groups that have signed cease-fire agreements with the regime. On the latter, the Karen see the referendum as "a joke."

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Comment  
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¶11. (C) The Free Burma Rangers' snapshot of northern Karen State indicates that the initiative and upper hand remain with the regime troops. The Karen, meanwhile, must cope with more population displacement, increasing landmine casualties, hampered access to food and relief supplies, distress over the assassination of a key political leader, and absence of hope over national political developments.

¶12. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassies Rangoon and Bangkok.  
MORROW